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SUBJECT: POLITICS & RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN KENYA

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[1](#)C. 06 NAIROBI 5393  
[1](#)D. 06 NAIROBI 5112

Note: Reftels discuss ethnicity and politics in Kenya. End Note.

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: We estimate Kenya's religious demographics at 80 percent Christian, 10 percent Muslim and 10 percent followers of traditional African religions and other faiths. In the past, significant numbers of Kenyan voters have responded to appeals by their religious leaders to rise above ethnic identity in support of political positions of their faith community. Religious identity over time erodes the overwhelming influence of ethnicity on Kenyan politics. Signs of increasing tensions over political issues between Kenya's Christian majority and small, but vocal, Muslim minority are cause for concern. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) While estimates of Kenya's religious demographics vary widely, our close examination of the best available population data indicates a split of 80 percent Christian, 10 percent Muslim and 10 percent followers of traditional African religions and other faiths. Attempts to organize explicitly Christian and Muslim political parties have not succeeded. Political mobilization is typically accomplished through ethnic and regional identities. Certain religious leaders and organizations have notable political influence concerning specific issues and so are courted by politicians.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Inter-Religious Council of Kenya brings together Christian, Muslim and Hindu leaders, but has a very limited public profile, seldom commenting on current affairs. At the local level, religious leaders of various faiths and denominations often work together to address common issues of concern, such as calming ethnic or religious tensions.

Muslim Kenya: Divided ethnically, regionally and politically

[1](#)4. (SBU) Estimates of Kenya's Muslim population range as low as 8 percent and as high as 25 percent. We are convinced that 10 percent is the most accurate estimate. The Muslim population consists of four ethnic/regional divisions, discussed below. These four divisions normally unite over specific issues of Islamic identity, but otherwise go their own way politically.

[1](#)5. (SBU) Coastal Muslims make up approximately 60 percent of Kenya's Muslim population and 6 percent of Kenya's overall population. They account for approximately 50 percent of the population of Coast province. This community is ethnically mixed and divided amongst competing sects and tendencies. These various ethnicities, sects and tendencies usually unite over issues of common concern, although they contend against

one another for leadership positions in mosques and Muslim associations. Coastal Muslims dominate leadership positions in Kenya's two main Muslim associations, the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims (SUPKEM) and the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK).

¶6. (SBU) The Kenyan Somali population, centered on North East province but with a substantial Nairobi-based component, accounts for about 20 percent of Kenya's Muslim population and 2 percent of Kenya's overall population. They are overwhelmingly Sunni and have both a traditionalist/Sufi camp and a Wahabist/radical camp. Of the 10 percent of top government positions held by Muslims, Somalis predominate.

¶7. (SBU) The Borana (Oromo) and the closely related Orma and Gabra make up another division of Kenya's Muslim community. These Cushitic peoples live in remote and sparsely populated north central Kenya. Their communities include a significant minority of Christians and traditionalists. They make up about 10 percent of Kenya's Muslim population and about 1 percent of Kenya's overall population. They tend not to identify closely with fellow Muslims from elsewhere in Kenya, due largely to their isolation. They are heterodox in their Islamic beliefs and practices, mixing many elements of traditional belief.

¶8. (SBU) The final 10 percent of Kenya's Muslim community consists of small Muslim minorities among the predominantly Christian Kamba, Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, Kalenjin, and Rendille, among others. It also includes Nairobi's Nubian community (Sudanese origin) and Muslim members of the South Asian community outside Coast province. Also included here are Kenya's Ismaili Muslim community, which is small, but influential due to its charitable activities and strong

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presence in Kenyan commerce and media (the Nation group). The Ismailis are a moderate branch of Shi'a Islam led by a hereditary imam, the "Aga Khan."

¶9. (SBU) Given the ethnic and regional cleavages noted above, no Muslim religious leader commands national influence among all Kenyan Muslims. The two most influential leaders are Professor Abdul Ghafar Busaidy, Chairman of SUPKEM, and Sheikh Mohammed Dor, Organizing Secretary of CIPK. They are both from Coast province and so have little influence with Somalis in North East province or Boranas in Eastern province and only limited influence with Nairobi's Muslim community.

¶10. (SBU) The Muslim leadership attempts to mobilize the Muslim community around certain key issues, such as preservation of "Khadi courts" (courts that decide issues of personal status according to Shari'a law) and opposition to some anti-terrorism measures (claimed to be discriminatory). This mobilization is fairly effective on the coast, somewhat less so in Nairobi and generally ineffective elsewhere. Kenyan Muslims often complain of harassment by security officials on false suspicions of holding "terrorist connections" or sympathies. SUPKEM and CIPK, along with a host of smaller, more radical groups, and Muslim NGOs (which receive substantial support from donors in Arab countries), often hold rallies to protest perceived anti-Muslim international events, such as conflict in the Middle East or recent events in Somalia. The United States is almost always cited during these demonstrations for various alleged anti-Muslim offenses.

¶11. (SBU) SUPKEM at times makes demands on the government to address specific issues, and threatens to withhold support should these demands not be met. Past practice, however, indicates that, as concerns electoral politics, Muslim voters listen more to their ethnic and regional community leaders than to their religious leaders. Normally, all candidates contesting elections in Muslim majority districts are Muslims.

## Christian Kenya: Organizing for Coordinated Engagement

¶12. (SBU) Kenyan official national identity is largely Christian. Kenyan national public events typically open and close with a Christian prayer and include Christian references throughout the ceremony, without a nod to fellow Kenyans who follow other faiths. Major political figures are publicly favored by specific church leaders. Christian leaders regularly speak out on political issues. Most church leaders do not hesitate to instruct their flocks on how to vote. It is common practice for ministers to yield their pulpit to favored politicians during worship services. Certain Christian leaders are able to attract larger and more enthusiastic crowds of supporters than can any of Kenya's political leaders.

¶13. (SBU) Roughly 58 percent of Kenyan Christians are Protestant and the remaining 42 percent are Catholics (the single largest Christian denomination in Kenya present throughout the country). The most prestigious and influential Protestant churches are the Presbyterians, the Anglicans, the Methodists and the African Inland Church. The Baptists also have a substantial following. Of growing importance, especially in cities, are the large number of small independent Pentecostal and "revivalist" churches.

¶14. (SBU) Of the 18 most influential Christian leaders in Kenya (all denominations), seven are Kikuyu and two others are from the closely related Embu and Meru communities. Thus, while the Kikuyu/Embu/Meru make up 32 percent of Kenya's population, they account for 50 percent of top Christian leaders.

¶15. (SBU) The Catholic hierarchy in Kenya is widely perceived to be pro-government (President Kibaki is Catholic), despite the opposition of the Catholic Episcopal Conference to the government's draft constitution (see below). Catholic Archbishop Okoth of Kisumu is widely considered a supporter of fellow ethnic Luo Raila Odinga, a prominent opposition leader.

¶16. (SBU) There are three main Christian interdenominational organizations in Kenya. The National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK) brings together all the mainline Protestant churches. The NCCK was considered anti-Government during the Moi era. NCCK leaders were outspoken on human rights issues and at the forefront of the movement for multiparty democracy. Today, NCCK is not clearly identified as pro- or anti-government, although several former NCCK leaders now

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serve in senior posts in the Kibaki administration. The Evangelical Alliance of Kenya (EAK) was prominently pro-government in the Moi era. Among its member churches is the African Inland Church, of which Moi is a staunch member. EAK took the position during Moi's reign that churches should stay out of politics. These days, EAK leaders join NCCK leaders and the Catholic Episcopal Conference in advocating certain political positions while not identifying with a particular party. The Organization of African Independent Churches (OAIC) does not engage in political activity, although some of its member churches do. The OAIC represents independent African churches, mostly of a strongly charismatic bent.

¶17. (SBU) A perceived threat from Kenya's small but vocal Muslim community is the greatest spur to interdenominational Christian political activism in Kenya. During the run up to the November 2005 national referendum on the draft constitution, the NCCK, EAK and the Catholic Episcopal Conference all publicly opposed the draft constitution on the grounds that it included provisions for "Khadi Courts" to rule on personal status questions for Muslims. They objected that the constitution should not provide institutions for one religious community denied to others. While Kenya's

Protestant and Catholic leaders had worked together to promote reconciliation among warring ethnic communities, they had not previously collaborated on a national political issue. "The Christian vote" played a major part in the success of the anti-draft constitution forces in the referendum vote. The concerns regarding the Muslim community that led to the political position of the Christian churches during the referendum vote have not dissipated.

Traditional Kenya & Others: Not Politically Engaged

¶18. (SBU) About 10 percent of Kenyans are adherents of traditional African religions. They are found in small numbers among nearly all of Kenya's ethnic communities. They are not formally organized and have very little public voice and practically no political influence.

¶19. (SBU) Kenya's Hindu and Sikh communities possess prominent places of worship in Nairobi and Mombasa, but their numbers are very small relative to the general population (less than one-half of one percent). They are, however, politically influential out of proportion to their numbers due to their strong presence in Kenyan commerce and habit of financing Kenyan politicians. Kenya also has a Baha'i community (about 100,000 members) and a Jewish community (about 100 Kenyans and 300 expatriate members), neither of which engages in politics.

Comment: Religious Identity Contributes toward the Slow Erosion of the Ethnic Factor in Kenyan Politics

¶20. (SBU) In the past, significant numbers of Kenyan voters have responded to appeals by their religious leaders to rise above ethnic identity in support of political positions of their faith community. Religious identity over time erodes the overwhelming influence of ethnicity on Kenyan politics.

¶21. (SBU) Signs of increasing tensions over political issues between Kenya's Christian majority and Muslim minority are cause for concern. The government is regularly accused by SUPKEM leaders of possessing an anti-Muslim bias while Christian leaders often complain of government "pandering" to the Muslim leadership. Kenyan society would be well served by a more activist Inter-Religious Council of Kenya to promote peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. We will advocate a more proactive stance by the Inter-Religious Council during our discussions with its leadership.

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